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# THE BATTLE OF THE **SOMME** SECOND PHASE

By  
**JOHN BUCHAN**



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**THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME**  
**SECOND PHASE**







EVENING BEHIND THE LINE



# THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

SECOND PHASE

BY  
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L.L.



# THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.

**T**HE capture of Guillemont on September 3rd meant the end of the German second position on the whole front between Thiepval and Estrées. The Allies were faced with a new problem, to understand which it is necessary to consider the nature of the defences still before them and the peculiar configuration of the country.

The advance of July 1st had carried the first enemy lines on a broad front, but the failure of the attack between Gommecourt and Thiepval had made the breach eight miles less than the original plan. The advance of July 14th gave us the second line on a still narrower front—from Bazentin le Petit to Longueval. The danger now was that the Allied thrust, if continued, might show a rapidly narrowing wedge which would result in the formation of a sharp and precarious salient.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

Accordingly Sir Douglas Haig broadened the breach by striking out to left and right, capturing first Pozières and the high ground at Mouquet Farm, and then—on his other flank—Guillemont and Ginchy. These successes made the gap in the second position some seven miles wide, and brought the British front in most places to the highest ground, from which direct observation was obtainable over the lower slopes and valley pockets to the east. We did not yet hold the complete crown of the ridge, though at Mouquet Farm and at High Wood we had positions which no superior height commanded.

The German third position had at the beginning of the battle been only in embryo. Before the attack of July 14th it had been more or less completed, and by the beginning of September it had been greatly elaborated and a fourth position prepared behind it. It was based on a string of fortified villages which lie on the reverse slopes of the main ridge—Courcelette, Martinpuich, Flers, Lesbœufs, and Morval. Behind it was an intermediate line, with Le Sars, Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and Gueudecourt as strong positions in it; and further back a fourth position, which lay just west of the Bapaume-Peronne road, covering the villages

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

of Sailly-Saillisel and Le Transloy. This was the line protecting Bapaume; the next position, at this moment only roughly sketched out, lay well to the east of that town.

Since the battle began the Germans had, up to the second week in September, brought 61 Divisions into action in the Somme area; 7 had been refitted and sent in again; on September 14th they were holding the line with 15 Divisions—which gives us 53 as the number which had been used up. The German losses throughout had been high. The French casualties had been singularly light—for they had fought economically under close cover of their guns, and had had, on the whole, the easier tactical problem to face. The British losses had been, beyond doubt, lower than those of the enemy, and our most conspicuous successes, such as the advance of July 1st south of Thiepval and the action of July 14th, had been achieved at a comparatively small cost. Our main casualties arose from the failure north of Thiepval on the first day, and the taking of desperately defended and almost impregnable positions like Delville Wood and Guillemont. In the ten weeks' battle the enemy had shown many ups and downs of strength. At one moment his whole front would

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

appear to be crumbling ; at another the arrival of fresh batteries from Verdun and new troops would solidify his line. The effort had strained his capacity to its full. He had revived the old First Army—which had been in abeyance since the preceding spring—and given it to von Below north of the Somme, while the Second Army, now under von Gallwitz, held the front south of the river. He had placed the Crown Prince of Bavaria, commanding the Sixth Army, in charge of the sector comprising his own and the First and Second Armies. He had followed the British plan of departing from the old Corps system and creating groups—through which a large number of Divisions, drawn from many Corps, were successively passed. He had used in his defence the best fighting material he possessed. During those ten weeks almost all the most famous German units had appeared on the Somme—the cream of the Bavarian troops, the Fifth Brandenburgers, and every single Division of the Guard and Guard Reserve Corps.

## *THE ALLIED PLAN.*

In the early days of September there was evidence that the enemy was in no very happy



A HEAVY GUN IN ACTION.

A GERMAN GUN DESTROYED BY OUR ARTILLERY.





## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

condition. The loss of Ginchy and Guillemont had enabled the British to come into line with the left wing of Fayolle's great advance, while the fall of certain vital positions on the Thiepval Ridge gave us observation over a great space of country and threatened Thiepval—which was the pivot of all the German defence in the northern section of the battle-ground. The Allied front north of the Somme had the river as a defensive flank on its right, and might presently have the Ancre to fill the same part on its left. Hence the situation was ripe for a further thrust which, if successful, might give our advance a new orientation. If the German third line could be carried it might be possible to strike out on the flanks, repeating on a far greater scale the practice already followed. Bapaume itself was not the objective, but a thrust north-eastward across the upper Ancre, which might get behind the great slab of unbroken enemy positions from Thiepval northwards. That would be the ultimate reward of a complete success; in the meantime our task was to break through the enemy's third line and test his powers of resistance.

It seemed a propitious moment for a concerted blow. The situation on the whole front was good. Fayolle's left wing had won conspicuous

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

successes and had their spirits high, while Micheler was moving his pincers towards Chaulnes and playing havoc with the main German lateral communications. Elsewhere in Europe things went well for the Allies. On August 28th Rumania had entered the war and her troops were pouring into Transylvania. As it happened, it was a premature and fruitless movement, but it compelled Germany to take instant steps to meet the menace. There had been important changes in the German Higher commands, and it might reasonably be assumed that von Hindenburg and von Ludendorff were not yet quite at ease in the saddle. Brussilov was still pinning down the Austro-German forces on the Russian front and Sarrail had just begun his serious offensive in the Balkans. In the event of a real *débâcle* in the West the enemy might be hard pressed to find the men to fill the breach.

Every action, it should be remembered, is a packet of surprises. There is an immediate local objective, but on success any one of twenty consequences may follow. The wise commander cannot count on any of these consequences, but he must not neglect them in his calculations. If the gods send him good fortune he must be ready to take it,

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

and he naturally chooses a season when the gods seem propitious.

On Tuesday, September 12th, a comprehensive bombardment began all along the British front from Thiepval to Ginchy. The whole of Sir Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army was destined for the attack, as well as the right Corps—the First Canadian—of the Fifth Army, while on the left of the battle to another Division was allotted a preliminary attack, which was partly in the nature of a feint and partly a necessary preparatory step. The immediate objective of the different units must be clearly noted. On the left of the main front one Canadian Division was directed against Courcellette. On their right a Division of the New Army—that Scottish Division which had won high honour at Loos—had for its task to clear the remains of the old Switch Line and encircle Martinpuich, but not—on the first day at any rate—to attempt the capture of what was believed to be a most formidable stronghold. Going south, two Territorial Divisions—Northumbrian and London—had to clear High Wood. On their right the New Zealanders had Flers as their objective, while two Divisions of the New Army had to make good the ground east and north of Delville Wood. Next to them the

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

Guards and a Division of the old Regulars were to move north-east from Ginchy against Lesbœufs and Morval, while on the extreme right of the British front another Division of London Territorials were to carry Bouleaux Wood and form a defensive flank.

The forces to be used in the new advance were for the most part fresh. The Guards had not been in action since Loos the previous September, the Canadians were new to the Somme area, while it was the first experience of the New Zealanders on the Western Front. Two of the Divisions had been some considerable time already in the front trenches, but the others had been brought up for the purpose only a few days before. All the troops were of the best quality, and had a proud record behind them. More perhaps than any other part of the battle this was an action of the British *corps d'élite*.

In this stage, too, a new weapon was to be used. The "tanks," officially known as "Machine Gun Corps, Heavy Section," had come out from home some time before and had been parked in secluded spots at the back of the front. The world is now familiar with descriptions and pictures of those strange machines, which, shaped like monstrous toads,

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

crawled imperturbably over wire and parapets, butted down houses, shouldered trees aside, and humped themselves over the stoutest walls. They were an experiment which could only be proved in practice, and the design in using them at this stage was principally to find out their weak points, so as to perfect their mechanism for the future. Their main tactical purpose was to clear out redoubts and nests of machine-guns which, as we had found to our sorrow at Loos, might hang up the most resolute troops. For this object they must precede the infantry attack, and the task of assembling them before the parapets were crossed was fraught with difficulty, for they were neither silent nor inconspicuous. The things had been kept a profound secret, and until the very eve of the advance few in the British Army had even heard of them. On September 14th, the day before our attack, some of them were seen by German aeroplanes, and the German troops were warned that the British had some strange new engine. Rumours also seem to have reached Germany five or six weeks earlier, for orders had been issued to supply the soldiers with a special kind of armour-piercing bullet. But as to the real nature of the device the Germans had no inkling.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

They had not grasped the principle, and it is doubtful if they have grasped it yet.

### *THE BATTLE OF SEPTEMBER 15th.*

On the night of Thursday, the 14th, the Fifth Army carried out their preliminary task. On a front of a thousand yards south-east of Thiepval a Brigade of the New Army stormed the Hohenzollern Trench and the strong redoubt which the Germans called the "Wunderwerk," taking many prisoners and themselves losing little. The fame of this enterprise has been somewhat obscured by the great advance which followed, but it was a most workmanlike and skilful performance, and it had a real effect on the subsequent battle. It deceived the enemy as to the exact terrain of the main assault, and it caused him to launch a counter-attack in an area which was part of the principal battle-ground, with the result that our left wing, after checking his attack, was able to catch him on the rebound.

The morning of Friday, September 15th, was perfect autumn weather with a light mist filling the hollows and shrouding the slopes. At 6 a.m. the British bombardment, which had now lasted for three days, rose to the fury

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

of hurricane fire. The enemy had a thousand guns of all calibres massed against us, and his defences consisted of a triple line of entrenchments and a series of advanced posts manned by machine-guns. Our earlier bombardment had cut his wire and destroyed many of his trenches, besides hampering greatly his bringing up of men, rations, and shells. The final twenty minutes of intense fire, slowly creeping forward with our infantry close under its shadow, pinned him to his positions and interfered with his counter-barrage. To an observer it seemed that the deafening crescendo all round the horizon was wholly British.

At twenty minutes past six our men crossed the parapets and moved forward methodically towards the enemy. The Germans, manning their trenches as our guns lengthened, saw through the thin mist inhuman shapes crawling towards them, things like gigantic slugs, spitting fire from their mottled sides. They had been warned of a new weapon, but what mortal weapon was this terror that walked by day? And ere they could collect their dazed wits the British bayonets were upon them.

On the left and centre the attack was instantly successful. The Canadians, after

## *THE BATTLE OF-THE SOMME.*

beating off the German counter-attack, carried Courcellette in the afternoon. In this advance French-Canadian troops played a distinguished part in winning back some miles of French soil for their ancient Motherland. On their right the Scottish Division, which had already been six weeks in line, performed something more than the part allotted it. The capture of Martinpuich was not part of the programme of the day's operations, but the Scots pushed east and west of the village, and at a quarter past five in the evening had the place in their hands. Further south there was fierce fighting in the old cock-pit of High Wood. It was two months since we had first effected an entrance into its ill-omened shades, but we had been forced back, and for long had to be content with its southern corner. The strong German third one—which ran across its northern half on the very crest of the ridge—and the endless craters and machine-gun redoubts made it a desperate nut to crack. We had pushed out horns to east and west of it, but the northern stronghold in the wood itself had defied all our efforts. It was held on that day by troops of the 2nd Bavarian Corps, and the German ranks have shown no better fighting stuff. Our first attack failed, but on a second attempt the London





FINAL INSTRUCTION BEFORE GOING INTO A BATTLE.



WAITING FOR THE SIGNAL TO ATTACK



INFANTRY SPREAD OUT GOING UP TO THE ATTACK.



FIXING BAYONETS PREVIOUS TO A CHARGE BY THE CANADIANS

## THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.

Territorials—a little after noon—swept the place clear, though not without heavy losses.

Beyond them the New Zealand Division, with a New Army Division on its right, carried the Switch line and took Flers with little trouble. They were preceded by a tank, which waddled complacently up the main street of the village, with the enemy's bullets rattling harmlessly off its sides, followed by cheering and laughing British troops. Further south we advanced our front for nearly a mile and a half. A light Division of the New Army, debouching from Delville Wood, cleared Mystery Corner on its eastern side before the general attack began, and then with splendid *élan* pushed forward north of Ginchy in the direction of Lesbœufs.

Only on the right wing was the tale of success incomplete. Ginchy, it will be remembered, had been carried by Irish troops on September 9th, but its environs were not yet fully cleared, and the enemy held the formidable point known as the Quadrilateral. This was situated about 700 yards east of Ginchy at a bend of the Morval road, where it passed through a deep wooded ravine. One of the old Regular Divisions was directed against it, with the Guards on their left and the London Territorials on their right. The

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

business of the last-named was to carry Bouleaux Wood and form a defensive flank north of Comblès, while the Guards were to advance from Ginchy on Lesbœufs. But the strength of the Quadrilateral foiled the plan. The Londoners did indeed enter Bouleaux Wood, but the Division on their left was fatally hung up in front of the Quadrilateral, and this in turn exposed the right flank of the Guards. The Guards Brigades advanced, as they have always advanced, with perfect discipline and courage. But both their flanks were enfiladed; the sunken road in front of them was strongly held by machine-guns; they somewhat lost direction; and, in consequence, no part of our right attack gained its full objective. There and in High Wood we incurred most of the casualties of the day. The check was the more regrettable since complete success in this area was tactically more important than elsewhere.

But after all deductions are made the day's results were in a high degree satisfactory. It was the most effective blow yet dealt at the enemy by British troops. It gave us not only the high ground between Thiepval and the Comblès Valley, but placed us well down the forward slopes. "The damage to the enemy's *moral*," says the official summary, "is probably

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

of greater consequence than the seizure of dominating positions and the capture of between four and five thousand prisoners." Three famous Bavarian Divisions had been engaged and completely shattered, and the whole enemy front thrown into a state of disorder. The tanks had, for a new experiment, done wonders. Some of them broke down on the way up, and of the twenty-four which crossed the German lines, seven came to grief early in the day. The remaining seventeen did brilliant service, some squatting on enemy trenches and clearing them by machine-gun fire, some flattening out uncut wire, others destroying machine-gun nests and redoubts or strong points like the sugar factory at Courcelette. But their moral effect was greater than the material damage they wrought. The sight of those deliberate impersonal engines ruthlessly grinding down the most cherished defences put something like panic into troops who had always prided themselves upon the superior merit of their own fighting "machine." Beyond doubt, too, the presence of the tanks added greatly to the zeal and confidence of our assaulting infantry. An element of sheer comedy was introduced into the grim business of war, and comedy is dear to the heart of the

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

British soldier. The crews of the tanks—which they called His Majesty's Landships—seemed to have acquired some of the light-heartedness of the British sailor. Penned up in a narrow stuffy space, condemned to a form of motion compared with which that of the queasiest vessel is stable, and at the mercy of unknown perils, these adventurers faced their task with the zest of a boy on holiday. With infinite humour they described how the enemy had surrounded them when they were stuck, and had tried in vain to crack their shell, while they themselves sat laughing inside.

In the achievements of the day our aircraft nobly co-operated. They destroyed thirteen hostile machines and drove nine more in a broken condition to ground. They bombarded enemy headquarters and vital points on all his railway lines. They destroyed German kite balloons and so put out the eyes of the defence. They guided our artillery fire and they brought back frequent and accurate reports of every stage in the infantry advance. Moreover, they attacked both enemy artillery and infantry with their machine-gun fire from a low elevation. Such performances were a proof of that resolute and exalted spirit of the offensive which inspired all arms of the service. In the week



## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

of the action on the whole Somme battle-ground only fourteen enemy machines managed to cross our lines, while our aeroplanes made between two thousand and three thousand flights far behind the German front.

In the Guards' advance, among many other gallant and distinguished officers, there fell one whose death was, in a peculiar sense, a loss to his country and the future. Lieutenant Raymond Asquith, of the Grenadier Guards, the eldest son of the British Prime Minister, died while leading his men through the fatal enfilading fire from the corner of Ginchy village. In this war the gods have taken toll of every rank and class. Few generals and statesmen in the Allied nations but have had to mourn intimate bereavements, and De Castelnau has given three sons for his country. But the death of Raymond Asquith had a poignancy apart from his birth and position, and it may be permitted to one of his oldest friends to pay his tribute to a heroic memory.

A scholar of the ripe Elizabethan type, a brilliant wit, an accomplished poet, a sound lawyer—these things were borne lightly, for his greatness was not in his attainments but in himself. He had always a curious aloofness

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

towards mere worldly success. He loved the things of the mind for their own sake—good books, good talk, the company of old friends—and the rewards of common ambition seemed to him too trivial for a man's care. He was of the spending type in life, giving freely of the riches of his nature, but asking nothing in return. His carelessness of personal gain, his inability to trim or truckle, and his aloofness from the facile acquaintanceships of the modern world made him incomprehensible to many, and his high fastidiousness gave him a certain air of coldness. Most noble in presence and with every grace of voice and manner, he moved among men like a being of another race, scornfully detached from the vulgarities of the common struggle, and only his friends knew the warmth and loyalty of his soul.

At the outbreak of war he joined a Territorial battalion, from which he was later transferred to the Grenadiers. More than most men he hated the loud bellicosities of politics, and he had never done homage to the deities of the crowd. His critical sense made him chary of enthusiasm, and it was no sudden sentimental fervour that swept him into the Army. He saw his duty, and, though it meant the shattering of every taste and interest, he did it joyfully,

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

and did it to the full. For a little he had a post on the Staff, but applied to be sent back to his battalion, since he wished no privileges. In the Guards he was extraordinarily happy, finding the same kind of light-hearted and high-spirited companionship which had made Oxford for him a place of delectable memories. He was an admirable battalion officer, and thought seriously of taking up the Army as his profession after the war—for he had all the qualities which go to make up a good soldier.

In our long roll of honour no nobler figure will find a place. He was a type of his country at its best—shy of rhetorical professions, austere self-respecting, one who hid his devotion under a mask of indifference, and, when the hour came, revealed it only in deeds. Many gave their all for the cause, but few, if any, had so much to give. He loved his youth, and his youth has become eternal. Debonair and brilliant and brave, he is now part of that immortal England which knows not age or weariness or defeat.

## *THE BATTLE OF SEPTEMBER 25th AND 26th.*

Meanwhile the French had not been idle. On Wednesday, September 13th, two days

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

before the British advance, Fayolle carried Bouchavesnes east of the Bapaume-Peronne road, taking over two thousand prisoners. He was now not three miles from the vital position of Mont St. Quentin—the key of Peronne—facing it across the little valley of the Tortille. Next day the French had the farm of Le Priez, south-east of Combles, and on the afternoon on Sunday, the 17th, south of the Somme their right wing carried the remainder of Vermandovillers and Berny, and the intervening ground around Deniécourt. The following day Deniécourt, with its strongly-fortified park, was captured. This gave them the whole of the Berny-Deniécourt plateau, commanding the lower plateau where stood the villages of Ablaincourt and Pressoire, and menaced Barleux—the pivot of enemy resistance south of the river.

For the next week there was a lull in the main operations while the hammer was swung back for another blow. On the 16th the 45th German Reserve Division counter-attacked the Canadians at Courcellette, and the 6th Bavarian Division, newly arrived, struck at the New Zealanders at Flers. Both failed, and south of Combles the fresh troops of the German 18th Corps succeeded no better against



A SUNKEN ROAD BEYOND COURCELETTE.



THE SUGAR-REFINERY AT COURCELLETTE.



THE MAIN STREET OF MARTINPUICH.



THE VICTORS OF MARTINPUCH.



## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

the French. The most vigorous counter-strokes were those which the Canadians received, and which were repeated daily for nearly a week. Meantime, on Monday, the 18th, the Quadrilateral was carried—carried by the Regular Division which had been blocked by it three days before. It was not won without a heavy fight at close quarters, for the garrison resisted stoutly, but we closed in on it from all sides, and by the evening had pushed our front five hundred yards beyond it to the hollow before Morval.

The week was dull and cloudy, and from the Monday to the Wednesday it rained without ceasing. But by the Friday it had cleared, though the mornings were now thick with autumn haze, and we were able once more to get that direct observation and aerial reconnaissance which is an indispensable preliminary to a great attack. On Sunday, the 24th, our batteries opened again, this time against the uncaptured points in the German third line like Morval and Lesbœufs, against intermediate positions like Gueudecourt, and especially against Thiepval—which we now commanded from the east. On that day, too, our aircraft destroyed six enemy machines and drove three more to earth. The plan was for an attack by the Fourth Army on Monday,

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

the 25th, with—on its left wing—small local objectives; but, on the right and centre, aiming at completing the captures which had been the ultimate objectives of the advance of the 15th. The following day the right wing of the Fifth Army would come into action, and it was hoped that from Thiepval to Combles the enemy would be driven back to his fourth line of defence, and our own front pushed up well within assaulting distance.

The hour of attack on the 25th was fixed at thirty-five minutes after noon. It was bright, cloudless weather, but the heat of the sun had lost its summer strength. That day saw an advance the most perfect yet made in any stage of the battle, for in almost every part of the field we won what we sought. The extreme left of the Third Corps was held up north of Courcellette, but its remaining two Divisions carried out the tasks assigned to them. So did the centre and left Divisions of the Fifteenth Corps, while part of the right Division managed to penetrate into Gueudecourt, but was compelled to retire owing to the supporting Brigade on its flank being checked by uncut wire. The Fourteenth Corps succeeded everywhere. The Guards, eager to avenge their sufferings of the week before, despite the heavy

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

losses on their left, swept irresistibly upon Lesbœufs. South of them a Regular Division took Morval—the village on the height north of Combles which, with its subterranean quarries and elaborate trench system, was a most formidable stronghold. The London Territorials on their right formed a defensive flank facing south at Bouleaux Wood. Combles was now fairly between the pincers. It might have fallen that day, but the French attack on Frégicourt failed, though they carried the village of Rancourt on the Bapaume-Peronne road.

By the evening of the 25th the British had stormed an enemy front of six miles between Combles and Martinpuich to a depth of more than a mile. The fall of Morval gave them the last piece of uncaptured high ground on that backbone of ridge which runs from Thiepval through High Wood and Ginchy. The next day we reaped in full the fruit of these successes. The Division of the New Army which had entered Gueudecourt the day before, but had failed to maintain their ground, now captured the famous Gird Trench, assisted by a tank and an aeroplane—which attacked the enemy with machine-gun fire—and by the afternoon had the village in their hands. This Division

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

was one which had suffered disaster at Loos a year before on that very day, and had, since the beginning of the Somme battle, shown that there is no more formidable antagonist than a British unit which has a score to pay off. It had already played a large part in the capture of Fricourt; it had cleared Mametz Wood, and it had taken Bazentin le Petit Wood on July 14th. It now crowned a brilliant record by the capture of Gueudecourt and an advance to within a mile of the German fourth position.

That day, too, the French took Frégicourt, and Combles\* fell. The enemy had evacuated it, and though great stores of material were taken in its catacombs, the number of prisoners was small.

Meantime, on the British left the success was not less conspicuous. Two Divisions of

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\* The French 1st Corps entered the line north of the Somme on August 23rd. At the end of six weeks, when they were relieved, they had taken the remainder of Maurepas, and the villages of Le Forest, Bouchavesnes, Rancourt, Frégicourt, and Combles, together with 4,000 prisoners, 23 guns, and 70 machine-guns. They believed that they had inflicted at least 40,000 casualties on the enemy. They had the satisfaction of breaking up two Divisions of the Prussian Guard, and of advancing two miles on a front of six. The 1st Corps was drawn from north-west France, largely from districts like Lille, Arras, and Roubaix, which had suffered most from the enemy.

## *THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN.*

the New Army, advancing under the cover of our artillery barrage, had carried Thiepval, the north-west corner of Mouquet Farm and the Zollern Redoubt on the eastern crest. The German pivot had gone, the pivot which they had believed impregnable. So skilful was our barrage that our men were over the German parapets and into the dug-outs before machine-guns could be got up to repel them. Here the prisoners were numerous, for the attack was in the nature of a surprise.

On the evening of September 26th the Allied fortunes in the West had never looked brighter. The enemy was now on his fourth line, without the benefit of the high ground, and there was no chance of retrieving his disadvantages by observation from the air. Since July 1st the British alone had taken over twenty-six thousand prisoners, and had engaged thirty-eight German Divisions, the flower of the Army, of which twenty-nine had been withdrawn exhausted and broken. The enemy had been compelled to use up his reserves in repeated costly and futile counter-attacks without compelling the Allies to relax for one moment their steady and methodical pressure. Every part of the Armies of France and Britain had done gloriously, and the new Divisions

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

had shown the courage and discipline of veterans. A hundred captured documents showed that the German *moral* had been shaken and that the German machine was falling badly out of gear. In normal seasons at least another month of fine weather might be reasonably counted on, and in that month further blows might be struck with cumulative force. In France they spoke of a "Picardy summer"—of fair bright days at the end of autumn when the ground was dry and the air of a crystal clearness. A fortnight of such days would suffice for a crowning achievement.

The hope was destined to fail. The guns were scarcely silent after the great attack of the 26th when the weather broke, and October was one long succession of tempestuous gales and drenching rains.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.

To understand the difficulties which untoward weather imposed on the Allied advance, it is necessary to grasp the nature of the fifty square miles of tortured ground which three months' fighting had given them, and over which lay the communications between their firing-line and the rear. From a position like the north end of High Wood almost the whole British battleground on a clear day was visible to the eye. To reach the place from the old Allied front line some four miles of bad roads had to be traversed. They would have been bad roads in a moorland parish, where they suffered only the transit of the infrequent carrier's cart, for, at the best, they were mere country tracks, casually engineered, and with no solid foundation. But here they had to support such a traffic as the world had scarcely seen before. Not the biggest mining camp or the vastest engineering undertaking had ever produced one tithe of the activity which existed behind each section of the battle line. There were places like Crewe, places like the skirts of

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

Birmingham, places like Aldershot or Salisbury Plain. It has often been pointed out that the immense and complex mechanism of modern armies resembles a series of pyramids which taper to a point as they near the front. Behind are the great general hospitals and convalescent homes; then come the clearing hospitals; then the main dressing stations; and, last of all, the advanced and regimental dressing stations—where mechanism fails. Behind are the huge transport depots and repairing shops, the daily trains to railhead, the supply columns; and, last, the hand carts to carry the ammunition to the firing line. Behind are the railways and mechanical transport; but at the end a man has only his two legs. Behind are the workshops of the Flying Corps, and the squadron and flight stations; but at the end of the chain is the solitary airplane coasting over the enemy lines and depending upon the skill and nerve of one man. Though all modern science has gone to the making of this war, at the end, in spite of every artificial aid, it becomes elementary, akin in many respects to the days of bows and arrows.

It was true of the whole front, but the Somme battle-ground was peculiar in this, that the area of land where the devices of civilisation



THE MAIN STREET OF FLERS.





A BRITISH



ACTION.



WELSH GUARDS IN A TRENCH AT GUILLEMONT.

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

broke down was far larger than elsewhere. Elsewhere it was defined more or less by the limits of the enemy's observation and fire. On the Somme it was defined by the previous three months' battle. It was not the German guns which made the trouble on the ground between the Albert-Peronne road and the British firing line. Casual bombardments troubled us little. It was the hostile elements and the unkindly nature of Mother Earth.

The country roads had been rutted out of recognition by endless transport, and, since they never had much of a bottom, the toil of the road-menders had nothing to build upon. New roads were hard to make, for the chalky soil was poor and had been so churned up by shelling and the movement of guns and troops that it had lost all cohesion. Countless shells had burst below the ground—causing everywhere subsidences and cavities. There was no stone in the countryside and little wood, so repairing materials had to be brought from a distance, which still further complicated the problem. To mend a road you must give it a rest, but there was little chance of a rest for any of those poor tortured passages. In all the district there were but two good highways, one running at right angles to our front

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

from Albert to Bapaume, the other parallel to our old front line from Albert to Peronne. These, to begin with, were the best type of *routes nationales*—broad, well-engineered, lined with orderly poplars. By the third month of the battle even these were showing signs of wear, and to travel on either in a motor car was a switchback journey. If the famous high-roads declined, what was likely to be the condition of the country lanes which rayed around Contalmaison, Longueval, and Guilleumont ?

Let us take our stand at the northern angle of High Wood. It is only a spectre of a wood, a horrible place of matted tree trunks and crumbling trench lines, full of mementoes of the dead and all the dreadful *débris* of battle. To reach it we have walked across two miles of what once must have been breezy downland, patched with little fields of roots and grain. It is now like a waste brickfield in a decaying suburb, pock-marked with shell-holes, littered with cartridge clips, equipment, fragments of wire and every kind of tin can. Over all the area hangs the curious, acrid, unwholesome smell of burning, an odour which will always recall to every soldier the immediate front of battle.

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

The air is clear, and we look from the height over a shallow trough towards the low slopes in front of the Transloy road—behind which lies the German fourth line. Our front is some thousands of yards off, close under that hillock which is the famous Butte de Warlencourt. Far on our left is the lift of the Thiepval ridge, and nearer us, hidden by the slope, are the ruins of Martinpuich. Le Sars and Eaucourt l'Abbaye are before us, Flers a little to the right, and beyond it Gueudecourt. On our extreme right rise the slopes of Sailly-Saillisel—one can see the shattered trees lining the Bapaume-Peronne road—and, hidden by the fall of the ground, are Lesbœufs and Morval. Behind us are things like scarred patches on the hillsides. They are the remains of the Bazentin woods and the ominous wood of Delville. The whole confines of the British battle-ground lie open to the eye from the Thiepval ridge in the north to the downs which ring the site of Combles.

Look west, and beyond the dreary country we have crossed rise green downs set with woods untouched by shell—the normal, pleasant land of Picardy. Look east, beyond our front line and the smoke puffs, across the Warlencourt and Gueudecourt ridges, and on the sky-

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

line there also appear unbroken woods, and here and there a church spire and the smoke of villages. The German retirement in September had been rapid, and we have reached the fringes of a land as yet little scarred by combat. We are looking at the boundaries of the battlefield. We have pushed the enemy right up to the edge of habitable and undevastated country, but we pay for our success in having behind us a strip of sheer desolation. To-day there are two No Man's lands. One is between the front lines; the other lies between the old enemy front and the front we have won. The second is the bigger problem, for across it must be brought the supplies of a great army. This is a war of motor-transport, and we are doing to-day what the Early Victorians pronounced impossible—running the equivalent of steam engines not on prepared tracks, but on highroads, running them day and night in endless relays. And these highroads are not the decent macadamised ways of England, but roads which would be despised in Sutherland [or Connaught.

The problem is hard enough in fine weather; but let the rain come and soak the churned-up soil and the whole land becomes a morass. There is no *pavé*, as in Flanders, to make a



## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

firm causeway. Every road becomes a water-course, and in the hollows the mud is as deep as a man's thighs. An army must be fed, troops must be relieved, guns must be supplied, and so there can be no slackening of the traffic. Off the roads the ground is a squelching bog, dug-outs crumble in, and communication trenches cease to be. In areas like Ypres and Festubert, where the soil is naturally water-logged, the conditions are worse, but at Ypres and Festubert we have not six miles of sponge, varied by mud torrents, across which all transport must pass.

Weather is a vital condition of success in operations where great armies are concerned, for men and guns cannot fight on air. In modern war it is more urgent than ever, since aerial reconnaissance plays so great a part, and Napoleon's "fifth element," mud, grows in importance with the complexity of the fighting machine. Again, in the semi-static trench warfare, where the same area remains for long the battlefield, the condition of the ground is the first fact to be reckoned with. Once we grasp this, the difficulty of the October campaign, waged in almost continuous rain, will be apparent. But no words can convey an adequate impression of the Somme area after a week's

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

downpour. Its discomforts had to be endured to be understood.

The topography of the immediate battleground demands a note from the point of view of its tactical peculiarities. The British line at the end of September ran from the Schwaben Redoubt, a thousand yards north of Thiepval, along the ridge to a point north-east of Courcellette; then just in front of Martinpuich, Flers, Gueudecourt, and Lesbœufs to the junction with the French. Morval was now part of the French area. From Thiepval to the north-east of Courcellette the line was for the most part on the crest of the ridge; it then bent southward and followed generally the foot of the eastern slopes. But a special topographical feature complicated the position. Before our front a shallow depression ran north-west from north of Saily-Saillisel to about two thousand yards south of Bapaume, where it turned westward and joined the glen of the Ancre at Miraumont. From the main Thiepval-Morval ridge a series of long spurs descended into this valley, of which two were of special importance. One was the hammer-headed spur immediately west of Flers, at the western end of which stood the tumulus called the Butte

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

de Warlencourt. The other was a spur which, lying across the main trend of the ground, ran north from Morval to Thillois, passing a thousand yards to the east of Gueudecourt. Behind these spurs lay the German fourth position. It was in the main a position on reverse slopes, and so screened from immediate observation, though our command of the higher ground gave us a view of its hinterland. Our own possession of the heights, great though its advantages were, had certain drawbacks, for it meant that our communications had to make the descent of the reverse slopes and were thus exposed to some extent to the enemy's observation and long-range fire.

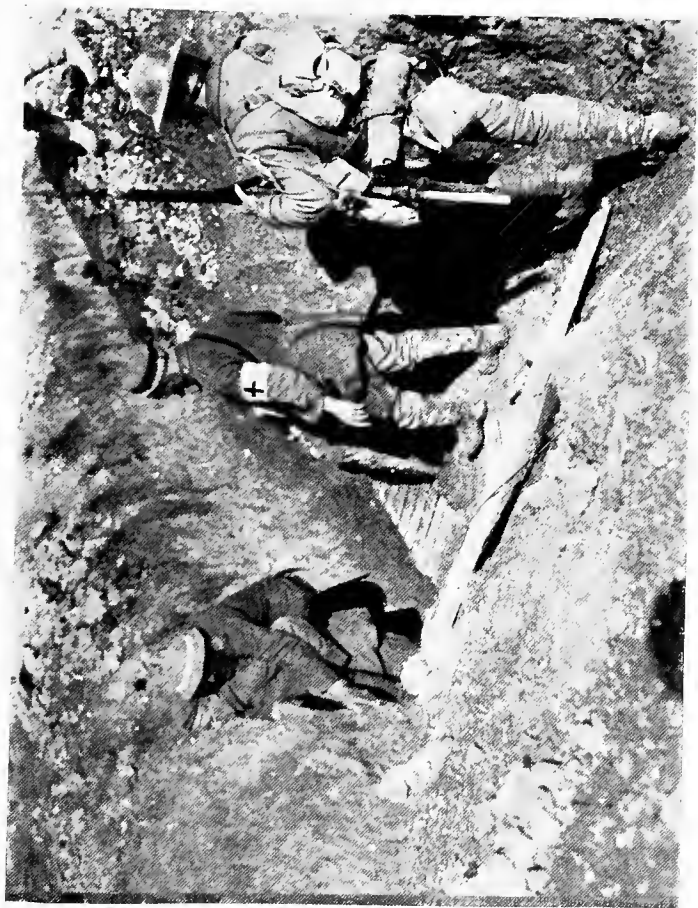
The next advance of the British Army had, therefore, two distinct objectives. The first—the task of the Fourth Army—was to carry the two spurs and so get within assaulting distance of the German fourth line. Even if the grand assault should be postponed, the possession of the spurs would greatly relieve our situation by giving us cover for our advanced gun positions and a certain shelter for the bringing up of supplies. It should be remembered that the spurs were not part of the German main front. They were held by the enemy as intermediate positions, and very

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

strongly held—every advantage being taken of sunken roads, buildings, and the undulating nature of the country. They represented for the fourth German line what Contalmaison had represented for the second; till they were carried no general assault on the main front could be undertaken. The second task—that of the Fifth Army—was to master the whole of the high ground on the Thiepval ridge, so as to get direct observation into the Ancre glen and over the uplands north and north-east of it.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SPURS.*

The expected fine weather of October did not come. On the contrary, the month provided a record in wet, spells of drenching rain being varied by dull, misty days, so that the sodden land had no chance of drying. The carrying of the spurs—meant as a preliminary step to a general attack—proved an operation so full of difficulties that it occupied all our efforts during the month, and with it all was not completed. The story of these weeks is one of minor operations—local actions with strictly limited objectives undertaken by only a few battalions. In the face of every conceivable



SCENE IN THE TRENCHES NEAR THIÉPVALLÉ



AFTER THE TAKING OF THIEPVAL.



CANADIAN TROOPS RETREATING FROM THE TRENCHES.

TRANSPORT COMING AND GOING





## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

difficulty we moved gradually up the intervening slopes.

At first there was a certain briskness in our movement. From Flers north-westward in front of Eaucourt l'Abbaye and Le Sars ran a very strong trench system, which we called the Flers line, and which was virtually a switch connecting the old German third line with the intermediate positions in front of the spurs. The capture of Flers gave us the south-eastern part of the line, and the last days of September and the first of October were occupied in winning the remainder of it. On September 29th elements of a Northumbrian Division carried the farm of Destremont—some four hundred yards south-west of Le Sars and just north of the Albert-Bapaume road. On the afternoon of October 1st we advanced on a front of 3,000 yards, taking the Flers line north of Destremont, while a London Territorial Division—the same which had taken High Wood—occupied the buildings of the old abbey of Eaucourt less than a mile south-east of Le Sars village. Here for several days remnants of the 6th Bavarian Division made a stout resistance. On the morning of October 2nd the enemy had regained a footing in the abbey, and during the whole of the next day and night

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

the battle fluctuated. It was not till the morning of the 4th that we finally cleared the place, and on October 6th the Londoners won the mill north-west of it.

On the afternoon of October 7th—a day of cloud and strong winds, but free from rain—we attacked on a broader front, while the French on our right moved against the key position of Sailly-Saillisel. After a heavy struggle a Division of the New Army captured Le Sars and won positions to the east and west of it, while our line was considerably advanced between Gueudecourt and Lesbœufs.

From that date for a month on we struggled up the slopes, gaining ground, but never winning the crests. The enemy now followed a new practice. He had his machine-guns well back in prepared positions and caught our attack with their long-range fire. To chronicle in detail these indeterminate actions would be a laborious task and would demand for its elucidation a map on the largest scale. We wrestled for odd lengths of fantastically named trenches which were often three feet deep in water. It was no light job to get out over the slimy parapets, and the bringing up of supplies and the evacuation of the wounded placed a terrible burden on our strength. Under conditions of such

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

grievous discomfort an attack on a comprehensive scale was out of the question, the more when we remember the condition of the area behind our lines. At one moment it seemed as if the Butte had been won. On November 5th we were over it and holding positions on the eastern side, but that night a counter-attack by fresh troops of the 4th Guard Division—who had just come up—forced us to fall back. This was the one successful enemy counter-stroke in this stage of the battle. For the most part they were too weak, if delivered promptly; and when they came later in strength they were broken up by our guns.

The struggle of these days deserves to rank high in the records of British hardihood. The fighting had not the swift pace and the brilliant successes of the September battles. Our men had to fight for minor objectives, and such a task lacks the impetus and exhilaration of a great combined assault. On many occasions the battle resolved itself into isolated struggles, a handful of men in a mud-hole holding out and consolidating their ground till their post was linked up with our main front. Rain, cold, slow reliefs, the absence of hot food, and sometimes of any food at all, made these episodes

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

a severe test of endurance and devotion. During this period the enemy, amazed at his good fortune, inasmuch as the weather had crippled our advance, fell into a flamboyant mood and represented the result as a triumph of the fighting quality of his own troops. From day to day he announced a series of desperate British assaults invariably repulsed with heavy losses. He spoke of British Corps and Divisions advancing in massed formation, when, at the most, it had been an affair of a few battalions. Often he announced an attack on a day and in a locality where nothing whatever had happened. It is worth remembering that, except for the highly successful action of October 21st, which we shall presently record, there was no British attack during the month on anything like a large scale, and that the various minor actions, so far from costing us high, were among the most economical of the campaign.

## *THE FIGHT FOR THIEPVAL RIDGE.*

Our second task, in which we brilliantly succeeded, was to master completely the Thiepval ridge. By the end of September the strong redoubts north-east of the village—

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

called Stuff and Zollern—were in our hands, and on the 28th of that month we had carried all Schwaben Redoubt except the north-west corner. It was Schwaben Redoubt to which the heroic advance of the Ulster Division had penetrated on the first day of the battle; but next day the advanced posts had been drawn in, and three months had elapsed before we again entered it. It was now a very different place from July 1st. Our guns had pounded it out of recognition; but it remained—from its situation—the pivot of the whole German line on the heights. Thence the trenches called Stuff and Regina ran east for some 5,000 yards to a point north-east of Courcellette. These trenches, representing many of the dominating points of the ridge south of the Ancre, were defended by the enemy with the most admirable tenacity. Between September 30th and October 20th, while we were battling for the last corner of the Schwaben, he delivered not less than eleven counter-attacks against our front in that neighbourhood, counter-attacks which in every case were repulsed with heavy losses. His front was held by the 26th Reserve Division and by Marines of the Naval Division, who had been brought down from the Yser, and who gave a better account of themselves

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

than their previous record had led us to expect. A captured German regimental Order, dated October 20th, emphasised the necessity of regaining the Schwaben Redoubt. "Men are to be informed by their immediate superiors that this attack is not merely a matter of re-taking a trench because it was formerly in German possession, but that the recapture of an extremely important point is involved. If the enemy remains on the ridge he can blow our artillery in the Ancre Valley to pieces, and the protection of the infantry will then be destroyed."

From October 20th to 23rd there came a short spell of fine weather. There was frost at night, a strong easterly wind dried the ground, and the air conditions were perfect for observation. The enemy was quick to take advantage of the change, and early on the morning of Saturday, October 21st, delivered that attack upon Schwaben Redoubt, for which the Order quoted above was a preparation.

The attack was made in strength and at all points but two was repulsed by our fire before reaching our lines. At two points the Germans entered our trenches, but were promptly driven out, leaving many dead in front of our position, and five officers and

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

seventy-nine other ranks prisoners in our hands.

This counter-stroke came opportunely for us, for it enabled us to catch the enemy on the rebound. We struck shortly after noon, attacking against the whole length of the Regina trench, with troops of the New Army on our left and centre and the Canadians on our right. The attack was completely successful, for the enemy, disorganised by his failure of the morning, was in no condition for prolonged resistance. We attained all our objectives, taking the whole of Stuff and Regina trenches, pushing out advanced posts well to the north and north-east of Schwaben Redoubt, and establishing our position on the crown of the ridge between the Upper Ancre and Courcellette. In the course of the day we took nearly 1,100 prisoners at the expense of less than 1,200 casualties, many of which were extremely slight. The whole course of the battle showed no more workmanlike performance.

There still remained one small section of the ridge where our position was unsatisfactory. This was at the extreme eastern end of Regina trench, just west of the Bapaume road. Its capture was achieved on the night of November 10th, when we carried it on a front

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

of 1,000 yards. This rounded off our gains and allowed us to dominate the upper valley of the Ancre and the uplands beyond it behind the unbroken German first line from Beaumont Hamel to Serre.

Meantime, during the month, the French armies on our right had been moving forward. At the end of September they had penetrated into St. Pierre Vaast Wood, whose labyrinthine depths extended east of Rancourt and south of Saillisel. The British gains of September 26th filled the whole French nation with enthusiasm, and General Joffre and Sir Douglas Haig exchanged the warmest greetings. The immediate object of the forces under Foch was to co-operate with the British advance by taking the height of Sailly-Saillisel, and so work round Mont St. Quentin, the main defence of Peronne on the north. On October 4th they carried the German intermediate line between Morval and St. Pierre Vaast Wood, and on October 8th—in a splendid movement—they swept up the Sailly-Saillisel slopes and won the Bapaume-Peronne road to a point 200 yards from its northern entry into the village. On October 10th Micheler's Tenth Army was in action on a front of three miles, and carried the western outskirts of Ablaincourt





MAKING A MILITARY ROAD.





IN ACTION.



ROAD-MAKING ON THE BATTLEFIELD.

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

and the greater part of the wood north-west of Chaulnes, taking nearly 1,300 prisoners, On the 15th Fayolle pushed east of Bouchavesnes, and on the same day, south of the Somme, Micheler, after beating off a counter-attack, carried a mile and a quarter of the German front west of Belloy, and advanced well to the north-east of Ablaincourt, taking some 1,000 prisoners. This brought the French nearer to the ridge of Villers-Carbonnel, behind which the German batteries played the same part for the southern defence of Peronne as Mont St. Quentin did for the northern.

Next day Sailly-Saillisel was entered and occupied as far as the cross roads, the Saillisel section of the village on the road running eastward being still in German hands. For the next few days the enemy delivered violent counter-attacks from both north and east, using liquid fire, but they failed to oust the garrison, and that part of the village held by the Germans was mercilessly pounded by the French guns. On the 21st the newly-arrived 2nd Bavarian Division made a desperate attack from the southern border of Saillisel and the ridge north-east of St. Pierre Vaast Wood, but failed with many losses. There were other heavy and fruitless counter-strokes south of

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

the Somme in the regions of Biaches and Chaulnes. The month closed with the French holding Saily but not Saillisel; holding the western skirts of St. Pierre Vaast Wood; and south of the river outflanking Ablaincourt and Chaulnes.

The record of the month, though short of expectations, was far from mediocre; and, considering the difficulties of weather, was not less creditable than that of September. The Allies at one point had broken into the German fourth position, while at others they had won positions of assault against it, and the southward extension of the battle-ground had been greatly deepened. They had added another 10,000 prisoners to their roll, bringing the total from July 1st to 1,469 officers and 71,532 other ranks, while they had also taken 173 field guns, 130 heavy pieces, 215 trench mortars, and 988 machine-guns. They had engaged 90 enemy Divisions, of which 26 had been taken out, re-fitted and sent back again—making a total of 116 brought into action. On November 1st the enemy was holding his front with 21 Divisions, so that 95 had been used up and withdrawn. Any calculation of enemy losses during the actual progress of

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

operations must be a very rough estimate, but it may be taken for granted that no German Division was taken out of the line till it had lost at least 5,000 men. This gives a minimum figure for enemy losses during the four months' battle of close on half a million, and it seems certain that the real figure was at least 25 per cent. greater. It must further be noted that, according to the German published returns, 41 per cent. of their casualties were irreplaceable—dead, prisoners, or so badly wounded as to be useless for the remainder of the war—a proportion greatly in excess of that which obtained among the Allies. During the month of October the British casualties were little beyond those of a normal month of trench warfare.

The study of captured documents casts an interesting light upon the condition of the enemy under the pressure of our attacks. Letters of individual soldiers and the reports of commanding officers alike showed that the strain had been very great. There were constant appeals to troops to hold some point as vital to the whole position, and these points invariably fell into our hands. There were endless complaints of the ruin wrought by our artillery and of the ceaseless activity of

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

our aircraft, and there were many unwilling tributes to the fighting quality of the Allied soldiers. But though indications of weakened enemy *moral* and failure in enemy organisation were frequent, he was still a most formidable antagonist. He had accumulated his best troops and batteries on the Somme front, and was fighting with the stubborn resolution of those who knew that they were facing the final peril, and that they alone stood between their country and defeat.

In the various actions the work of the Allied artillery was extraordinarily efficient. Their barrages brilliantly covered the advance of the infantry; they searched out and silenced enemy batteries; they destroyed great lengths of enemy trenches and countless enemy strongholds; and they kept up a continuous fire behind the enemy's front, interfering with the movement of troops and supplies, and giving him no peace for eight or ten miles behind his line. The "tanks," though only occasionally used, had some remarkable achievements to their credit. On a certain day one got behind the enemy's front, and by itself compelled the surrender of a whole battalion—including the battalion Commander. Much credit was due also to the Transport Service,



## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

which faithfully performed its duties under the most trying conditions.

The weather was bad for all, but perhaps it was worst for our aircraft. The strong south-westerly gales greatly increased the complexity of their task, since our machines were drifted far behind the enemy's front and compelled to return against a head-wind, which made their progress slow and thereby exposed them to fire, and, in the case of a damaged engine, forbade a glide into safety. Yet, in spite of adverse conditions, they showed in the highest degree the spirit of the offensive. They patrolled regularly far behind the enemy lines, and fought many battles in the air with hostile machines, and many with enemy troops on the ground. They did much valuable reconnaissance, and repeatedly attacked with success enemy lines of communication, ammunition dumps, billets, and depots. Toward the latter part of October the German machines were more in evidence, but we dealt satisfactorily with this increased activity. Captured German documents bore constant witness to our superiority in this arm. One Corps report described our work as "surprisingly brilliant." Another, emanating from an Army Headquarters, suggested methods of re organisation whereby it was hoped that

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

it would be possible "to contest *at least for some hours* the supremacy of the enemy in the air." As an instance of the audacity of our aviators we might quote the case of one pilot who, encountering a formation of ten hostile machines, attacked them single-handed and dispersed them far behind their own front.

We inflicted many losses on the foe, but we did not go scathless ourselves. The curt announcement in the *communiqués*—"One of our machines has not returned"—covered many a tale of bravery and misfortune. About half the missing came down in enemy territory and were made prisoners; the others perished in battle in the air, shot by machine or anti-aircraft gun, or dashed to earth by a crippled airplane. In a flight over the German lines on November 4th there died one of the most gallant figures of our day, conspicuous even in the universal heroism of his service. Lord Lucas, whom Oxford of twenty years ago knew as "Bron Herbert," had joined the Flying Corps at the age of forty. He had lost a leg in the South African War; he had had a distinguished political career, culminating in a seat in the Cabinet as President of the Board of Agriculture; he had great possessions and a thousand ties to ease; if ever man might

## *THE OCTOBER FIGHTING.*

have found his reasonable duty in a less perilous sphere it was he. But after the formation of the Coalition Government in May, 1915, he went straight into training for his pilot's certificate, and soon proved himself an exceptionally bold and skilful aviator. He did good work in Egypt, whence he returned in the spring of 1916, and after a few months spent in instructing recruits at home he came out to France in the early autumn. He was one who retained in all his many activities the adventurous zest and the strange endearing simplicity of a boy. With his genius for happiness the world in which he dwelt could never be a common place. In the air he found the pure exultant joy of living which he had always sought, and he passed out of life like some hero of romance, with his ardour undimmed and his dream untarnished.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.

On November 9th the weather improved. The wind swung round to the north and the rain ceased, but owing to the season of the year the ground was slow to dry, and in the area of the Fourth Army the roads were still past praying for. Presently frost came and a powder of snow, and then once more the rain. But in the few days of comparatively good conditions the British Commander-in-Chief brought the battle to a fourth stage and won a conspicuous victory.

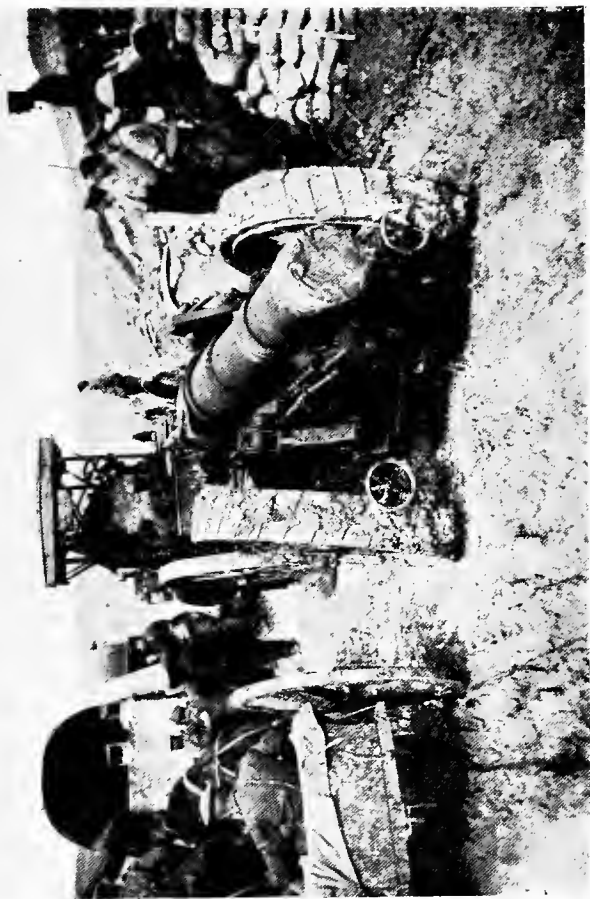
On the first day of July, as we have seen, our attack failed on the eight miles between Gommecourt and Thiepval. For four months we drove far into the heart of the German defences further south, but the stubborn enemy front before Beaumont Hamel and Serre remained untried. The position was immensely strong, and its holders—not without reason—believed it to be impregnable. All the slopes were tunnelled deep with old catacombs—many of them made originally as hiding-places



AN AMBULANCE STUCK IN THE MUD.



MOVING UP A BIG GUN OVER BAD COUNTRY.



A BIG GUN GOING UP IN BAD WEATHER,



A MUDDY ROAD.



## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

in the French Wars of Religion—and these had been linked up by passages to constitute a subterranean city, where whole battalions could be assembled. There were endless redoubts and strong points armed with machine-guns, as we knew to our cost in July, and the wire entanglements were on a scale which has probably never been paralleled. Looked at from our first line they resembled a solid wall of red rust. Very strong, too, were the sides of the Ancre, should we seek to force a passage that way, and the hamlets of Beaucourt and St. Pierre Divion, one on each bank, were fortresses of the Beaumont Hamel stamp. From Gommecourt to the Thiepval ridge the enemy positions were the old first line ones, prepared during two years of leisure, and not the improvised defences on which they had been thrown back between Thiepval and Chaulnes.

At the beginning of November the area of the Allied pressure was over thirty miles, but we had never lost sight of the necessity of widening the breach. It was desirable, with a view to the winter warfare, that the enemy should be driven out of his prepared defences on the broadest front possible. The scheme of an assault upon the Serre-Ancre line might

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

seem a desperate one so late in the season, but we had learned much since July 1st, and as compared with that date we had now certain real advantages. In the first place our whole tactical use of artillery had undergone a change. Our creeping barrage, moving in front of advancing infantry, protected them to a great extent from the machine-gun fusilade from parapets and shell-holes which had been our undoing in the earlier battle, and assisted them in keeping direction. In the second place our possession of the whole Thiepval ridge seriously outflanked the German front north of the Ancre. In the dips of the high ground behind Serre and Beaumont Hamel their batteries had been skilfully emplaced in the beginning of July, and they had been able to devote their whole energy to the attack coming from the west. But now they were facing southward and operating against our lines on the Thiepval ridge, and we commanded them to some extent by possessing the higher ground and the better observation. If, therefore, we should attack again from the west, supported also by our artillery fire from the south, the enemy guns would be fighting on two fronts. The German position in July had been a straight line; it was now a salient.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

We had two other assets for a November assault. The slow progress of the Fourth Army during October had led the enemy to conclude that our offensive had ceased for the winter. Drawing a natural deduction from the condition of the country, he argued that an attack on a grand scale was physically impossible, especially an attack upon a fortress which had defied our efforts when we advanced with fresh troops and unwearied impetus in the height of summer. Again, the area from Thiepval northward did not suffer from transport difficulties in the same degree as the southern terrain. Since we would be advancing from what was virtually our old front line, we would escape the problem of crossing five or six miles of shell-torn ground by roads ploughed up and broken from four months' traffic.

It is necessary to grasp the topographical features of the new battle-ground. From north of Schwaben Redoubt our front curved sharply to the north-west, crossing the Ancre five hundred yards south of the hamlet of St. Pierre Divion, and extending northward along the foot of the slopes on which lay the villages of Beaumont Hamel and Serre. From the high ground north-west of the Ancre several clearly marked spurs descend to the upper valley of

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

that stream. The chief is a long ridge with Serre at its western extremity, the village of Puisieux on the north, Beaucourt sur Ancre on the south, and Miraumont at the eastern end. South of this there is another feature running from a point a thousand yards north of Beaumont Hamel to the village of Beaucourt. This latter spur has on its south-west side a shallow depression up which runs the Beaucourt-Beaumont Hamel road, and it is defined on the north-east by the Beaucourt-Serre road. All the right bank of the Ancre is thus a country of slopes and pockets. On the left bank there is a stretch of flattish ground under the Thiepval ridge extending up the valley past St. Pierre Divion to Grandcourt.

On Sunday, November 12th, Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army held the area from Gommecourt in the north to the Albert-Bapaume road. Opposite Serre and extending south to a point just north of Beaumont Hamel lay two Divisions of the old Regulars, now much changed in composition, but containing battalions that had been through the whole campaign since Mons. In front of Beaumont Hamel was a Highland Territorial Division. They had been more than eighteen months in France, and at the end of July and the

## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

beginning of August had spent seventeen days in the line at High Wood. On their right, from a point just south of the famous Y Ravine to the Ancre, lay the Naval Division, which had had a long record of fighting from Antwerp to Gallipoli, but now for the first time took part in an action on the Western front. Across the river lay two Divisions of the New Army. The boundary of the attack on the right was roughly defined by the Thiepval-Grandcourt road.

The British guns began on Sunday a bombardment devoted to the destruction of the enemy's wire and parapets. It went on fiercely during the night, but did not increase to hurricane fire, so that the enemy had no warning of the hour of our attack. In the darkness of the early morning of Monday, November 13th, the fog gathered thick—a cold, raw vapour which wrapped the ground like a garment. It was still black darkness, darker even than the usual moonless winter night, when, at 5.45 a.m., our troops crossed the parapets. The attack had been most carefully planned, but in that dense shroud it was hard for the best trained soldiers to keep direction. On the other hand, the enemy had no warning of our coming till our men were surging over his trenches.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

The attack of the British left wing on Serre failed, as it had failed on July 1st. That stronghold, being further removed from the effect of our flanking fire from the Thiepval ridge, presented all the difficulties which had baffled us at the first attempt. South of it and north of Beaumont Hamel we carried the German first position and swept beyond the fortress called the Quadrilateral—which had proved too hard a knot to unravel four months earlier. This gave us the northern part of the under feature which we have already described as running south-east to Beaucourt. Our right wing had a triumphant progress. Almost at once it gained its objectives. St. Pierre Divion fell early in the morning and the Division of the New Army engaged there advanced a mile and took over 1,000 prisoners at a total cost of 450 casualties. By the evening they were holding the Hansa line which runs from the neighbourhood of Stuff Trench on the heights to the banks of the river opposite Beaucourt.

But it was on the doings of the two central Divisions that the fortune of the day depended, and their achievement was so remarkable and presented so many curious features that it is worth telling in some detail. The Highland

## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

Territorials—a kilted Division except for their lowland Pioneer battalion—had one of the hardest tasks that had faced troops in the whole battle, a task comparable to the taking of Contalmaison and Guillemont and Delville Wood. They had before them the fortress-village of Beaumont Hamel itself. South of it lay the strong Ridge Redoubt and south again the Y Ravine, whose prongs projected down to the German front line and whose tail ran back towards Station Road south of the Cemetery. This Y Ravine was some eight hundred yards long, and in places thirty feet deep, with overhanging sides. In its precipitous banks were the entrances to the German dug-outs, completely screened from shell-fire and connecting further back by means of tunnels with the great catacombs. Such a position allowed reinforcements to be sent up under ground, even though we might be holding all the sides. The four successive German lines were so skilfully linked up subterraneously that they formed virtually a single line, no part of which could be considered to be captured till the whole was taken.

The first assault took the Scots through the German defences on all their front, except just before the ends of the Y Ravine. They

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

advanced on both sides of that gully and carried the third enemy line shortly after daybreak. There was much stern fighting in the honey-combed land, but early in the forenoon they had pushed right through the German main position and were pressing beyond Station Road and the hollow where the village lies towards Munich Trench and their ultimate objective—the Beaucourt-Serre road. The chief fighting of the day centred round Y Ravine. So soon as we had gained the third line on both sides of it our men leaped down the steep sides into the gully. Then followed a desperate struggle—for the entrances to the dug-outs had been obscured by our bombardment, and no man knew from what direction the enemy might appear. About mid-day the eastern part of the ravine was full of our men, but the Germans were in the prongs. Early in the afternoon we delivered a fresh attack from the west and gradually forced the defence to surrender. After that it became a battle of *nettoyeurs*, small parties digging out Germans from underground lairs—for the very strength of his fortifications proved a trap to the enemy once they had been breached. If he failed to prevent our entrance he himself was wholly unable to get out.





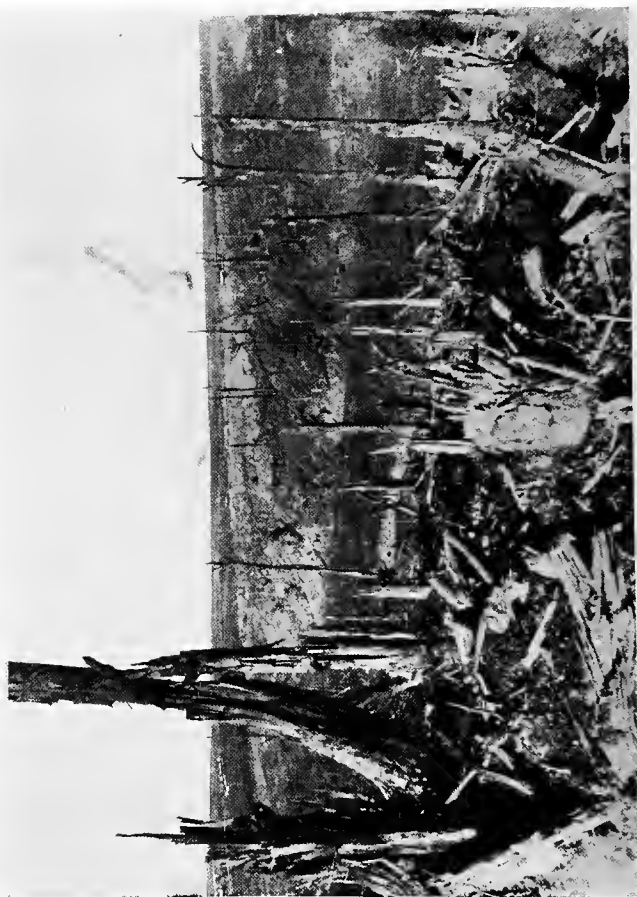
MUD AND TRENCH BOOTS.



OUR FLYING MEN AT WORK ON A CAPTURED GERMAN PLANE.



GERMAN COMMUNICATION TRENCH NEAR BEAUMONT HAMEL.



BEAUMONT HAMEL.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

The foggy autumn day was full of wild adventures. One Scots officer and two men took prisoner a German Battalion Commander and his Staff, found themselves cut off and the position reversed, and then, as supports came up, once more claimed their captives. A wounded signaller held up a German company in a burrow while he telephoned back for help. Ration stores were captured and muddy Highlanders went about the business of war eating tinned meat with one hand and smoking large cigars. By the evening the whole of Beaumont Hamel was occupied and posts were out as far as Munich Trench, while over 1,400 prisoners and between 50 and 60 machine-guns were the prize of the conquerors. To their eternal honour the Highland Territorials had stormed—by sheer hand-to-hand fighting—one of the strongest German forts on the Western front.

On their right the Naval Division advanced against Beaucourt. On the 1st of July the British trenches had been between five hundred and seven hundred yards from the German front line, leaving too great an extent of No Man's Land to be crossed by the attacking infantry. But before the [present action the Naval Division had dug advanced trenches, and now possessed a line of departure not more

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

than two hundred and fifty yards from the enemy. Their first objective was the German support line, the second Station Road—which ran from Beaumont Hamel to the main Albert-Lille Railway—and their third the trench line outside Beaucourt village. The wave of assault carried our men over the first two German lines, and for a moment it looked as if the advance was about to go smoothly forward to its goal. But in the centre of our front of attack, in a communication trench between the second and third German lines and about eight hundred yards from the river bank, was a very strong redoubt manned by machine-guns. This had not been touched by our artillery, and it effectively blocked the centre of our advance, while at the same time flanking fire from the slopes behind Beaumont Hamel checked our left. Various parties got through and reached the German support line and even as far as Station Road. But at about 8.30 the situation, as reviewed by the Divisional Commander, bore an ominous likeness to what had happened to the Ulstermen on July 1st. Isolated detachments had gone forward, but the enemy had manned his reserve trenches behind them, and the formidable redoubt was blocking any general progress.

## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

At this moment there came news of the right battalion. It was commanded by a young New Zealander, Lieut.-Colonel Freyberg, who had done brilliant service in Gallipoli, and had before the war been engaged in many adventurous pursuits. The message announced that his battalion had gone clean through to the third objective, and was now waiting outside Beaucourt village for our barrage to lift in order to take the place. He had led his men along the edge of the river to the Station Road, where he had collected odd parties of other battalions, and at 8.21 had reached Beaucourt Trench—a mile distant from our front of assault. On receipt of this startling news a Territorial battalion was sent up to his support, and all that day a precarious avenue of communication for food and ammunition was kept open along the edge of the stream, under such shelter as the banks afforded. A second attack on the whole front was delivered in the afternoon by the supporting Brigade of the Naval Division, but this, too, was held up by the redoubt, though again a certain number got through and reached Station Road and even the slopes beyond it. It was at this time that seventeen men of the Dublin Fusiliers, accompanied by a priest, performed a singular

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

feat. Far up on the high ground east of Beaumont Hamel they came upon a large party of Germans in dug-outs and compelled their surrender. They marched their four hundred prisoners stolidly back to our line through the enemy barrage and our own.

That night it was resolved to make a great effort to put the redoubt out of action. Two tanks were brought up, one of which succeeded in getting within range, and the garrison of the stronghold hoisted the white flag. The way was now clear for a general advance next morning—to assist in which a Brigade of another Division was brought up in support. Part of the advance lost direction, but the result was to clear the German first position and the ground between Station Road and Beaucourt Trench. At the same time the right battalion—which had been waiting outside Beaucourt for twenty-four hours—carried the place by storm. Its commanding officer, Lieut.-Colonel Freyberg, had been already three times wounded, but that morning he led the charge in person. Though wounded a fourth time most severely, he refused to lay down his command till he had placed posts with perfect military judgment to the east and north-east to prevent a surprise and had given



## *THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.*

full instructions to his successor. To his brilliant leadership the main achievement of the Naval Division was due. His success is an instructive proof of the value of holding forward positions even though flanks and rear are threatened, if you are dealing with a shaken enemy and have a certainty of supports behind you. Troops who make a bold advance will, if they retire, have achieved nothing and will certainly lose a large proportion of their strength. If they stay where they are they run the risk of being totally destroyed; but, on the other hand, there is a chance of completely turning the scale. For it should be remembered that an isolated detachment, if it has the enemy on its flank and rear, is itself on the flank and rear of the enemy, and the moral effect of its position may be the determining factor in breaking the enemy's resistance.

By the night of Tuesday, November 14th, our total of prisoners on the five-mile front of battle was well over five thousand—the largest captures yet made in the time by any army in the West since the campaign began. And the advance was not yet over. The German counter-attack of the 15th failed to win back any ground. Just east of Beaumont Hamel there was an extensive No Man's Land, for

## *THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.*

Munich Trench could not be claimed by either side, but in the Beaucourt area we steadily pressed on. On Thursday, the 16th, we pushed east from Beaucourt village along the north bank of the Ancre, establishing posts in the Bois d'Hollande to the north-west of Grandcourt. Frost had set in, and it was possible from the Thiepval Ridge or from the slopes above Hamel to see clearly the whole new battlefield, and even in places to follow the infantry advance—a thing which had not been feasible since the summer fighting. By that day our total of prisoners was over six thousand. On the 17th we again advanced, and on Saturday, the 18th, in a downpour of icy rain the Canadians on the right of the Fifth Army, attacking from Regina Trench, moved far down the slope towards the river, while the centre pushed close to the western skirts of Grandcourt.

It was the last attack, with which we may conclude the second phase of the Battle of the Somme. The weather now closed down like a curtain upon the drama. Though in modern war we may disregard the seasons, the elements take their revenge and armies are forced at a certain stage, whether they will it or not, into that trench warfare, which takes the place of the winter quarters of Marlborough's day.

## THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.

The Battle of the Ancre was a fitting *dénouement* to the great action. It gave us three strongly-fortified villages, and practically the whole of the minor spur which runs from north of Beaumont Hamel to Beaucourt. It extended the breach in the main enemy position by five miles. Our front was now far down the slopes from the Thiepval Ridge and north and west of Grandcourt. We had taken well over seven thousand prisoners and vast quantities of material, including several hundred machine-guns. Our losses had been comparatively slight, while those of the enemy were—on his own admission—severe. Above all, just when he was beginning to argue himself into the belief that the Somme offensive was over we upset all his calculations by an unexpected stroke. We had opened the old wound and undermined his *moral* by reviving the terrors of the unknown and the unexpected.

## CHAPTER IV.

### CONCLUSION.

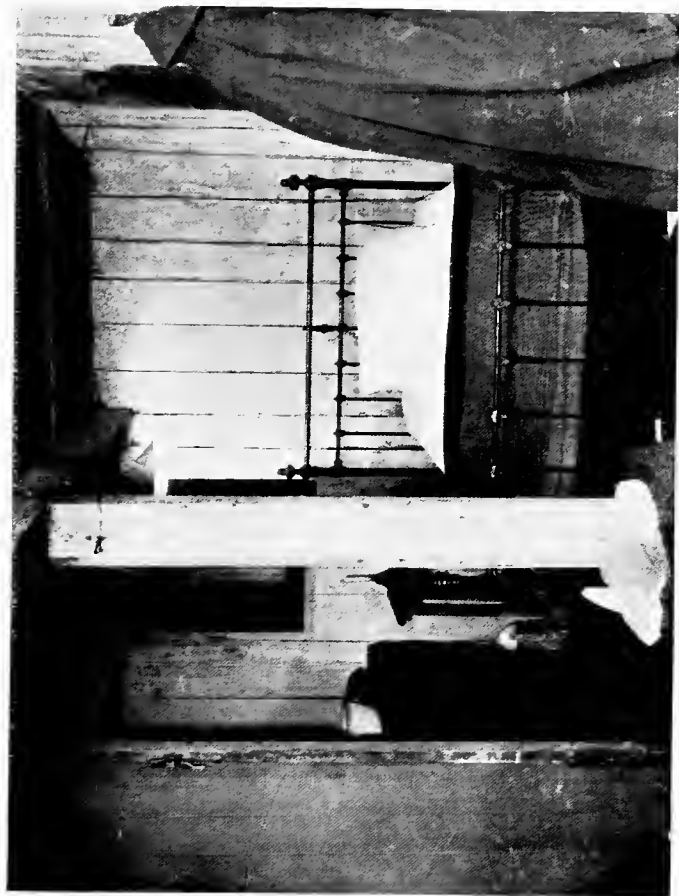
We are still too close to events to attempt an estimate of the Battle of the Somme as a whole. It will be the task of later historians to present it in its true perspective. But one thing is clear. Before July 1st Verdun had been the greatest continuous battle fought in the world's history; but the Somme surpassed it both in numbers of men engaged, in the tactical difficulty of the objectives, and in its importance in the strategical scheme of the campaign. Calculations of the forces employed would for the present be indiscreet, and estimates of casualties untrustworthy, but some idea of its significance may be gathered from the way in which it preoccupied the enemy High Command. It was the fashion in Germany to describe it as a futile attack upon an unshakeable fortress, an attack which might be disregarded by her public opinion while she continued her true business of conquest in the East. But the fact remained that the great bulk of the German troops—and by far



THE STATION AT BEAUMONT HAMEL.



THE ENTRANCE OF A CAPTURED GERMAN DUG-OUT.



COMFORT IN A DUG-OUT.



MONUMENT ERECTED BY THE GERMANS TO THEIR COMRADES WHO TOOK THE  
VILLAGE OF BEAUMONT HAMEL IN 1914.





COUNTING THE PRISONERS AS THEY COME FROM BEAUMONT HAMEL.



THE MILL AT BEAUCOURT-SUR-ANCRE



THE RAILWAY LINE AT BEAUCOURT.



## CONCLUSION.

the best of them—were kept congregated in this area. In November Germany had 127 Divisions on the Western front, and no more than 75 in the East. Though Brussilov's attack and von Falkenhayn's Rumanian expedition compelled her to send fresh troops eastward, she did not diminish, but increased, her strength in the West. In June she had 14 Divisions on the Somme; in November she had in line—or just out of it—well over 40.

Let it be freely granted that Germany met the strain in a soldierly fashion. As von Armin's Report showed, she set herself at once to learn the lessons of the battle and revise her methods where revision was needed. She made drastic changes in her High Commands. She endeavoured still further to exploit her already much-exploited man-power; she decreed a *levée en masse*, and combed out—even from vital industries—every man who was capable of taking the field. She swept the young and old into her ranks, and, as was said of Lee's army in its last campaign, she robbed the cradle and the grave. Her effort was magnificent—and it was war. She had created since July 1st some thirty odd new Divisions, formed partly by converting garrison units into field troops and partly by regrouping units from existing

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

formations—taking a regiment away from a four-regiment Division and a battalion from a four-battalion regiment and withdrawing the Jaeger battalions. But these changes, though they increased the number of her units, did not add proportionately to the aggregate of her numerical strength, and we may take 100,000 men as a fair estimate of the total gain in field troops from this readjustment. Moreover, she had to provide artillery and staffs for each of the new Divisions, which involved a heavy strain upon services already taxed to the full. We know that her commissioned classes had been badly depleted. “The shortage,” so ran an order of von Hindenburg’s in September, “due to our heavy casualties, of experienced, energetic, and well-trained junior officers is sorely felt at the present time.”

The Battle of the Somme had, therefore, fulfilled the Allied purpose in taxing to the uttermost the German war machine. It tried the Command, it tried the nation at home, and it tried to the last limit of endurance the men in the line. The place became a name of terror. Though belittled in *communiqués* and rarely mentioned in the Press, it was a word of ill-omen to the whole German people—that “blood-bath” to which many journeyed and

## CONCLUSION.

from which few returned. Of what avail were easy conquests on the Danube when this deadly cancer in the West was eating into the vitals of the nation? Winter might give a short respite—though the Battle of the Ancre had been fought in winter weather—but spring would come and the evil would grow malignant again. Germany gathered herself for a great effort, marshalling for compulsory war-work the whole male population between seventeen and sixty, sending every man to the trenches who could walk on sound feet, doling out her food supplies on the minimum scale for the support of life, and making desperate efforts with submarine warfare to cripple the enemy's strength. But what if the enemy followed her example? The Allies lagged far behind her in their adoption of drastic remedies, and even so had won to an equality and more than an equality in battle-power. What if they also took the final step? They had shown that they had no thought of peace except at their own dictation. They had willed the end; what if they also willed the ultimate means?

In November, behind the rodomontade of German journalists over Rumanian victories and the stout words of German statesmen, it was easy to discern a profound and abiding

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

anxiety. Let us take two quotations. The *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten* wrote: "We realise now that England is our real enemy, and that she is prepared to do everything in her power to conquer us. She has gone so far as to introduce compulsory service to attain her aims. Let us recognise her strength of purpose, and take the necessary precautions. It is more than probable that, if lack of war material and supplies does not put a stop to the Battle of the Somme, she will not abandon her plan; on the contrary, she will make use of the winter to accumulate immense reserves of ammunition. There is no doubt as to her having the money necessary, and it would be foolish optimism on our part to imagine that the terrible fighting on the Western front will not start again next spring." And this from the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*: "We recognise that the whole war to-day is, in the main, a question of labour resources, and England has taken the lead in welding together all such resources. Thanks to her immense achievement in this sphere our most dangerous enemy has arrived at a position in which she is able to set enormous weapons against us. It is the Battle of the Somme above all that teaches us this."



## CONCLUSION.

In every great action there is a major purpose—a reasoned and calculated purpose which takes no account of the accidents of fortune. But in most actions there come sudden strokes of luck which turn the scale. For such strokes a General has a right to hope, but on them he dare not build. Marengo, Waterloo, Chancellorsville—most of the great battles of older times—showed these good gifts of destiny. But in the elaborate and mechanical warfare of to-day they come rarely, and in the Battle of the Somme they did not fall to the lot of the British Commander-in-Chief. We did what we set out to do; step by step we drove our way through the German defences; but it was all done by hard and stubborn fighting, without any bounty from capricious fortune. The Germans had claimed that their line was impregnable; we broke it again and again. They had counted on their artillery machine; we crippled and outmatched it. They had decried the fighting stuff of our New Army; we showed that it was more than a match for their Guards and Brandenburgers. All these things we did—soberly and patiently in the British fashion. Our major purpose was attained. We had applied a steady, continuous, and unrelenting pressure to a large section of

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

the German front. It was not the recapture of territory that we sought, but the weakening of the numbers, *matériel*, and *moral* of the enemy.

The fall of winter, with its storms and sodden ground and short days, marked the close of a stage, but not of the battle. Advances might be fewer, the territory gained might be less, but the offensive did not slacken. Still, on a front of nearly forty miles, the Allied pressure was continuously maintained by means of their artillery and other services, and the sapping of the enemy's strength went on without ceasing. The hardships of winter would be felt more acutely by forces which had been outmatched in the long five months' battle. Those who judged of success only by the ground occupied might grow restive during these days of apparent inaction, but the soldier knew that they represented blows struck at the enemy which, in effect, were not less deadly than a spectacular advance. The major purpose was still proceeding.

















